

For the Love of a Woman

It felt like winter was slipping away. I think that was why I pushed it. We're both getting older, and as the energy wanes, so do our desires to do some things. But it has been two years since we had the sleds out, having somehow missed the opportunity last year, and there is something about a slow ride through the woods on a snowmobile that I really enjoy. I'm a lot more fussy about when I go than I used to be (not too cold, snow not so deep that it becomes a huge chore), and I don't like to go as far as I once did, but I still like to go. I also like to ski and snowshoe, but if you want to cover more country, nothing quite beats a snowmobile.



As it turns out, this particular ride did not shape up to be the kind of a ride that I most enjoy. Oddly enough, when it came time to go, it seemed like my spouse was not that eager to start out. There was plenty of snow, and plenty more of it was falling. It was plenty warm. True, he had to work at starting two of our seemingly vast fleet of older sleds in order to get one to run for me, but that part was done, and I really thought he should have had more of a smile on his face. It's already been a long winter of working on equipment for this logger, so I chalked his reluctance up to the mechanical challenges, and we headed out.

The kind of ride I enjoy is the kind that involves put- putting along about as slow as my sled will tolerate and the snow conditions will allow. Not really the sort of folks that belong out on the groomed snowmobile trails, I like to poke along on the unplowed forest roads of the Chippewa. I like to get a good look at the woods, and to see what is stirring itself in winter. You can see where the deer are feeding, and where the wolves roam. Eagles are already back, with some birds beginning to tend their nests. There's a heron rookery I can really only access in the winter, and even though it's devoid of the birds right now, it is still an interesting sight. One year we came across a big bull moose in the Egg Lake bog. Uncommon on the Chippewa since forest changes associated with early logging and settlement, we still host a few of these big beasts. On the southern edge of their range, with the loss of the northwest population and the spiraling decline of the northeast population, it may be that Minnesota will not continue to host this species much longer.

It's important on this kind of venture to bring along a chainsaw, because we sometimes find downed trees blocking the way. There have been several storm events on the Chippewa this year, and many of the lower standard roads are still not cleared. But I ride with a man who handles such things with grace, and so this generally is not a problem. One of the things I particularly enjoy is when we stop somewhere along the way, whack up a little fire, and enjoy a winter picnic.

The weather put me in mind of a similar day years ago when we had arranged a winter picnic with my husband's folks and my young daughters. It was a late winter day and the snow was driving so hard I wondered how in the world we would make a good day of it, but my father-in-law had gone before us and erected a tarp in the woods. I am quite certain that my mother-in-law brought dessert. Always one to jump at such occasions, this delightfully spunky woman knew that life is what you make it, and by that shelter we had a fine picnic we remember still. I think of my girls now down at school in the Cities, and wonder if they'll want their children to know the ways they grew up with. There are so many great ways to enjoy the forest, and you will find many opportunities on the Chippewa to share special times with your family.

We weren't planning a picnic on our latest trip, as it was snowing so hard we were planning just a short outing. It was so warm the snow was quite wet, and my sled would labor and die. When it wasn't dead, I needed to push it as much as I could in order to keep it going. It was deep enough I needed to be sure to stay in the trail left by my partner, the leader on the big machine. As you might have guessed, he is the one with the actual sledding talent. He breaks trail, and I follow as best I can. I have learned from years of doing this that if I have trouble all I need to do is to wait a while, and he will eventually discover I am no longer behind him and will come back to help me.

So the way this trip went, the warmth and the snow not only led to mechanical challenges and plenty of stop and go, but my helmet visor was constantly fogged up or iced over, so I needed to keep it up in order to see anything at all. Seeing was still a challenge as the snow was pelting me in the face and my eyelashes were crusting over with ice. It seemed to work best to keep one eye closed and one mittened hand shielding my face, the second hand trying to keep the sled on track and gunning the sled as much as I could to keep it from dying. The sled is rather noisy just now, owing to a need for welding on the exhaust, so when it did die it was something of a relief to pull off my helmet and ear plugs and just enjoy the quiet for a bit. Come to think of it, the quiet was only relative, because there was a pretty good wind.

We eventually made it to a hard-packed trail, and we enjoyed a good laugh when the guide asked me if I would prefer the short version or long of this trip? What should have been his mustache was now just huge, icy chunks, and I wondered whether faces as wet and cold as ours would be susceptible to frostbite as we beat our way back.

When we got back home from our most recent sledding adventure, soaked to the skin and faces coated with ice, the man pointed his finger at me. "Some people could have foreseen this", he said. With a heavy sigh and a shake of his head, I think I heard him mutter something under his breath. It sounded a bit like, "for the love of a woman".

I have a little trip soon with my mother to a lovely warm place, but my Honey has promised me when I get back that he will make me a picnic spot in the pines. He feels sure that there will still be snow by then, and given the 10 or so inches that came yesterday adding to what is already a growing base up north, he is probably right. By then it will be early March, the sun will be higher in the sky, and some winter days so warm that when you stop for your picnic you can take off all your heavy gear and just soak it in. We will sip on our coffee and think of the folks who taught us their ways in these woods.

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